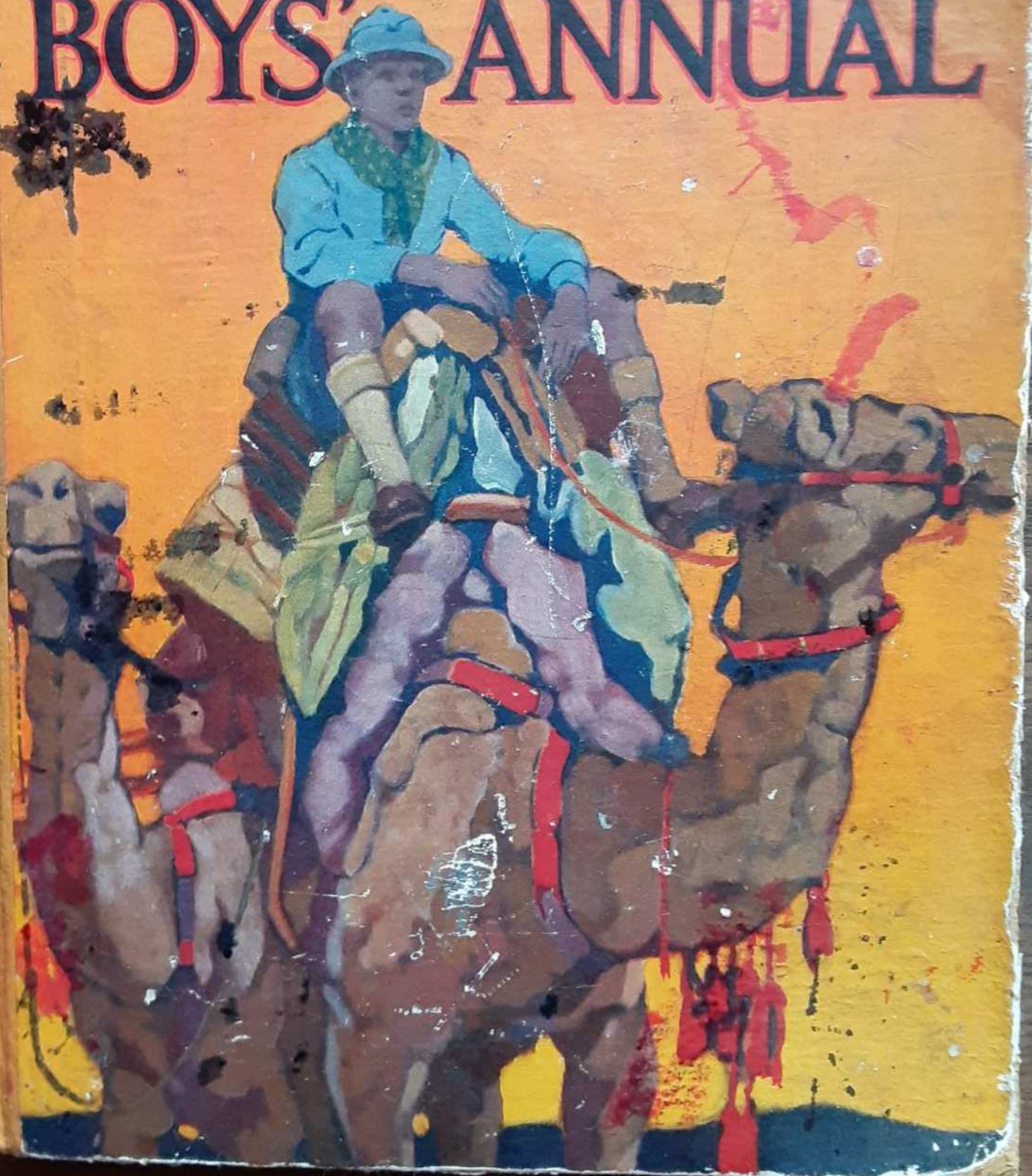


BLACKIE'S BOYS' ANNUAL



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A Mystery of the North-West

By Percy Dent

I

Jim Waverly told the strange tale which follows, to friends at a pleasure camp in the Adirondacks. The circumstance that brought it about was quite matter of fact. Bacon had run short. No one felt like tramping down to the valley for a new supply. Evening had already fallen and the day had been strenuous. In desperation, one of Jim's friends suggested fruitarian breakfast, a proposal which drew from another the ironic suggestion "Let's live on nuts".

"Don't," cried Jim so sharply that everyone looked at him. Seeing an explanation of some kind was necessary he gave the rather strange one: "It makes me think of spooks. You know," and went on to quote the well-known lines from Gilbert Murray's translation of *Alcestis*, "'The cold grey hand at stern and oar which ferries bodies from shore to shore'."

"I'm blest if I know," said the startled nut advocate. "Why on earth should what I said make you think of ghastly stuff like that?"

And so Jim Waverly explained why.

II

What I'm going to tell you about (began Jim) happened at a bear-hunting camp in the backwoods of North-West Canada.

Incidentally it's a true story. By the time I'm finished I think you may realize as much. The Canadian backwoods aren't the Adirondacks, by a long way. Queer things happen in those untamed expanses. Well, here goes.

The camp where it all took place had been built by us on a jack-pine flat near a small unnamed stream. Amongst the tall shapely trees which surrounded it was but little dense undergrowth and the ground was sandy: an ideal camping spot. In the middle of the clearing burned the fire, never allowed to go out. On either hand roomy shelters made of interlaced boughs served, one as kitchen, the other as sleeping-quarters. In front of the clearing the ground sloped gently down to the margin of a deep, coldly-blue lake. Early autumn had come and the snow-line on the hills by the lake's far shore had already crept down to the lower slopes. A distinct hint of frost sharpened the air, while, hollow-toned in the distance, wolf answered wolf in hunger-saddened voice.

The three of us who had clubbed together to make up the bear-hunting expedition were Jack Evans, Joe Stewart, and myself, but at the time of which I am thinking a fourth man had joined in. His name was John Steele. You couldn't call Steele one of ourselves and you couldn't call him exactly a servant, though I believe this was the original intention in including him. What you could call him was a dashed

queer customer. We found that out right at the start.

A hitch had arisen over getting together a suitable mule team. Animals of the right kind and stamina were offered us only at an excessive figure. Then it was John Steele first came upon the scene. Tweak-ing Stewart by the coat sleeve he engaged him in a whispered conversation. Presently, as Jack Evans and I gathered round we heard Stewart saying:

"Do it by odic force or anything else you like, though I'm hanged if I know what you're talking about. Only get together a decent mule team at the figure you name by this afternoon and of course you can come along and make yourself useful."

We caught a fleeting glimpse of a gaunt grey man, well into middle-age, ere Steele slipped away upon his self-appointed task. That abiding impression of greyness would have remained with anyone after a mere glance. Eyes, hair, skin, all seemed to have settled down to the same pervading tinge, as you see sometimes in a very old, very shabby, room where carpet, ceiling, and wallpaper have similarly weathered to the one tone of faded senility.

"Hullo!" said Evans then. "What's the great idea?" To our surprise Stewart began rubbing the back of his head rather foolishly.

"I say," he ventured, "I hope it's all right. That chap said he could get together a mule team in half no time. When I asked him how, he said that, or anything else, could be done by 'odic' force."

"And you told him to let the 'odic' rip and see what it would amount to," broke in Jack Evans. "I don't think we'll be wasting precious moments awaiting developments on that score. Quite evidently the man's mad."

Stewart blinked a few times, rubbed his head a bit more, then nodded agreement.

"He's got queer grey eyes, though, that fellow," he said rather dreamily. "While you're looking at him you can't help believing him."

We tried to get mules all the morning and right on till the middle of the afternoon, without success. Prices ruled, it seemed to us, uniformly extortionate. In another half-hour we would have entrained again for a different starting-off point, when Steele appeared, and the animals as well. They were sturdy beasts and dirt cheap. His "odic force" had worked for this once, which of course let us in for keeping to Stewart's promise about taking him along as general factotum. Anyone might have said we were fortunate. Steele it was who discovered the trail that in due time led to that ideal site for our hunting camp.

We hadn't heard much more about the "odic" till we reached the clearing. Then we did, and in a pretty odd way too. Steele refused point-blank to sit down and eat with us, though this was the first real meal we'd had since leaving railhead. Previously, we'd been so keen to push on, we did our eating in a regular scramble, snatching what we wanted as the occasion offered.

Steele's refusal made Evans distinctly shirty. His nerves had got a bit frayed, as were all of ours, with the self-imposed forced marching. "Tell you what, Stewart," he said. "If the fellow's sulking over any fancied grievance, he'll just have to quit camp, promise or no promise of yours. We can't be bothered with that sort of thing here."

I am ashamed to say I resorted to a cheap jibe. "Possibly he prefers to live upon odic force," I said, and suddenly, emerging from the shadow of a jack-pine, John Steele fixed me with those odd piercing eyes of his and said: "I do."

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Just for a moment it was quite uncanny. We could all have sworn he hadn't been anywhere in the neighbourhood. I told you, at the fringe of the camp clearing there was no dense undergrowth, only naked pine boles with latticed between them the lake, gleaming, a broken, pale, silver line in the moonlight.

It was quite a comfort to us to discover the next day that the old boy's boast about existing on something which, from the material point of view at any rate, is nothing at all, was a drawing of the long bow. Steele wouldn't eat our food so much as once from the time we picked him up till—Well he never did, but he did eat wild berries, and roots which he clawed up out of the hard earth with his naked hands and—yes—and nuts. Any amount of nuts. So now you know why that suggestion about a nut diet gave me a "stinger". You see, before the camp had been pitched three days we were beginning to wonder if Steele were a man at all.

There was that odd instance of the bear spoor. It was on another blank day, as we thought, without sign of game—Stewart appealed to Steele half-jokingly. "Can that odic force of yours which got us the mules be switched over to improve bear hunting?" he chaffed.

Again the fierce fanatical flash of those piercing grey eyes. Steele said nothing, only made a sweeping gesture of the arm which would have been intensely theatrical in any man who had a scrap of the mountebank about him, but then Steele hadn't. We followed our guide perhaps a short half-mile after that before we picked up fresh spoor. Later, after the hunt, on our return to camp we decided again to entice Steele to join us at the evening meal, but we got no opportunity, for he had vanished from our sight.

This time we all became right-down uncomfortable. I know I did. I don't attempt to excuse myself. Those eerie silences of the far North-West aren't the best thing for helping to shake off groundless fears. Human beings simply don't vanish, so Steele hadn't got to vanish either. We came to a tacit mutual determination to find him before we settled in for sleep.

We found him all right after some searching, nearly stumbled over him, in fact, lying on his back exactly along the shadow line of a large jack-pine tree. He wasn't asleep and he didn't see us, though his eyes were staring wide open with, if possible, a more concentrated grey light in them than ever. Evans kicked him, gently at first, then not so gently. "Get up," he commanded, and his tones were hoarse. "We want to talk to you." But Steele didn't get up, and when we bent over him he didn't appear to be breathing, any more than he appeared to be dead.

Suddenly Stewart grabbed Evans and myself and dragged us away. He was pale and shaking.

When we'd got him to the fire and dosed him with whisky he told us the cause of his being so utterly unmanned. He'd let his mind hark back to that hoary-headed mystery tale *Dracula* wherein the central figure is a creature who is neither living nor dead but, in the definition of its literary creator, "un-dead"; an evil spirit who by magic power is able to insinuate himself into, and temporarily to re-animate, a human corpse and make it writhe out of its tomb to do most terrible things. Of course we chipped Stewart unmercifully till he found himself, but, when all was over and done, there's no denying that the incident didn't help the state of our own nerves a bit.

III

It was either the next day or the one after that when Steele "materialized" a full-grown bear for us. By now he had come to behave as though his possession of a miraculous, wonder-working odic force was a matter of personal superiority

note. For the first time he looked at us with eyes which, though grey, were not forceful or blazing with suppressed fury, but wistful as a punished child's.

"So there are limits to this cinch of yours," cut in Jack Evans, evidently sensing old Steele's rapid change of mood and willing to follow it up. "I bet the odic



A weird experiment

over ourselves to be taken for granted. For the first time in our enforced intimacy with him he showed signs of waxing a trifle communicative: told us how he had discovered the secret of his superhuman control of matter through mind more than twenty years ago.

"You ask what odic force will do?" he continued. "My reply is, there is nothing it will not do: nothing except——" his voice tailed off on an unusual quavering

wouldn't really *make* things, living things I mean."

Steele's eyes at once lit up again. "Oh yes, it can. Indeed it can. What I hadn't been able to make it do up to last week was to change certain conditions, but that's all altered now. At last I have proved the power of mind over matter can really accomplish anything."

"Good for you," said Evans. "Just oblige by creating a bear and making it

run across this trail: a real bear, mind, not a ghost."

What will you think of us when I tell you events had so keyed us up to expect anything that for the next ten minutes we actually did sit there waiting for that odic bear to put in an appearance while Steele remained on a tree stump, still as a statue, hand half upraised, his lips moving soundlessly, for all the world like a withered old sorcerer making incantation. Nothing happened and the tension relaxed suddenly as it had built itself up.

Evans and Stewart, who had picked up their sporting rifles, threw them aside simultaneously, Evans with a satisfied laugh. I remember, too, that I said something or other, certainly something quite unworth the saying. Steele alone still held on to his stuffed-dummy pose, when quite beyond all doubt there did come a grunting and a scuffling in the underbrush (this happened well away from the actual camp) and—I'd swear to it—a brown snout protruded within ten feet of us and was as suddenly withdrawn again. But for that careless casting aside of rifles half a minute previously one or other of us would for certain have bagged that bear—if it was a bear. As things were we turned "goosey". I know I did and I think I can speak of the others, all except old John Steele whose gaze of grim contemptuous satisfaction I shall never forget.

IV

That night we knew something definite must be done. What had started as a bear-hunting camp was fast turning itself into a spook prospecting proposition. The healing breath of ice-laden wind, the soothing silver of the lake, God's gift of the great out-doors, all was going for nothing before John Steele's crazy mumbo-jumbo. We

cursed Steele heartily, the three of us, each in his own way. We'd have given our skins, almost, never to have set eyes on him, but a lot of use were such thoughts in face of the fact that there he was amongst us. Why didn't we shift him at all costs? Why didn't we give him a mule, rations, money, and kick him out? Look here. I shan't beat about the bush. The truth is, we were too much afraid of him.

"Of course it may all be coincidence," averred Evans, who, to do him credit, kept his head by far the best of us. "As to providing the mule team, we may rule that out as ordinary enough. Steele knew the right market to go to, where we, as newcomers, didn't. The fact of our striking the track of a bear a couple of days ago, just after the fellow had invoked his odic force, also needn't amount to much. People out trailing bears are liable to hit the right track at any time."

"What about that trance Steele was in?" I asked. I was in need of Evans's sanity and he gave it.

"Well, call it a trance by all means if you like," he said. "Lots of folk who are a bit queer mentally go off into trances. Taken by itself there's nothing so much in that either."

"What about the bear?" This time the objection came from Stewart, and we had nothing to say, except that Evans murmured the word coincidence again, half under his breath. This time it sounded almost like an apology. Certainly as an explanation it was a bit "thin".

Stewart himself made the suggestion which brought matters finally to a head, speaking in a voice high-pitched with emotion: "I can't help it," he jerked out. "I'm beginning to believe the man—if he is a man—can do all he says, but I must know, know for certain. I've simply got to know, one way or another. Can't stand the

strain of being in doubt. Besides, Steele seems perfectly willing to submit his powers to any sort of test. Well then, I propose we do test him in a way that will absolutely clinch things."

"How?" queried Evans. Stewart evidently had done some previous thinking along the same lines. He answered:

"The fair thing will be to call Steele here and ask him to approve of what we decide upon. I think—I think he should materialize something more, another living creature out of nothing. Twice following within twelve hours would put matters beyond all coincidence. Don't you agree with me?"

We did call up Steele and put the same point to him. He agreed with a self-sufficient calmness of itself ominous in the extreme.

"Name what I am to do for you," he said simply but with, I am bound to own it, great dignity. "The odic force which I command can accomplish anything." (You will note by now he had dropped all hint of exceptions or limitations.) Stewart repeated the substance of what he had said to us:

"Some living creature. Choose whatever you like, Steele, but let it be alive."

Never shall I forget the expression which kindled, glowed upon and presently convulsed Steele's face as he acquiesced. Can you imagine a captive animal finding the door of his cage ajar?

"I will materialize a living creature before you," said Steele. "You must wait. You must give me a little while, but I shall surely do it, even as I did before. This time keep your rifles in your hands that you may have your test complete. The way to prove that what I bring before you is alive is to shoot it."

Steele was sitting upon an up-ended prune box. To this day the sight of a

prune box gives me an odd turn. He sat between Evans and myself, the flickering firelight giving to his gaunt, hollow features a startling likeness to the freshly unwrapped head of a mummy. You know the usual ruddiness of flame—well, it didn't warm those features the least bit. If Steele was grey by daylight he was, if possible, by contrast, greyer in the fire glow, colourless even to the lips. The man's eyes had once again become fixed, as when we stumbled upon him in a trance. He didn't mutter any more soundless incantations, he didn't move a muscle, just sat on and on, rigid, facing the leaping fire with one arm outstretched. I don't know how long he sat: I don't know how long we did. Oh yes! You think I'm a fine romancer: "Quite an acquisition in the Adirondacks, but can't he tell them!" Well, listen.

The sounds came softly at first. We wouldn't have believed our ears. Then they got louder and we had to. You know (or don't you know?) the more intimate conditions of life in the extreme North-West? No one, for instance, except in almost unheard-of cases of extreme urgency travels at night. Yet the creak, creak, which came to us was the chafing of oar in rowlock out on the lake; and we were more than a day's journey from the next living soul. Someone was rowing a small boat from nowhere to our camp—and it wasn't possible.

Just the one man: we saw him presently as the boat grated on the lake margin and he got out and began, as though drawn by a power outside himself, to walk up the intervening slope, coming nearer and nearer; a dim figure against the water-line, dim as the boat he had appeared in, grey, almost, as the face of Steele itself.

I wonder to this day why we didn't shoot according to the agreement by which we were to make the test complete. Had the

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weirdness of the experience frozen our muscles rigid? Or is there indeed a sentient force for good outside ourselves, as well as a force for evil? After a fateful ten seconds, during which so much we little dreamt of lay in the balance, two things happened further to transform the situation. The "man" spoke and simultaneously we recognized the cut of his tunic.

He was wearing the uniform of the North-West police.

"Evening, gentlemen," he said cheerfully. "A wonderfully fine night, this, for travelling through the bush: nearly as light as day."

We couldn't speak: not one of us, so he tried again. By now he was almost up to the camp-fire: "No intrusion, I hope."

The second time he awaited our reply and receiving none that was coherent pushed his way briskly up to the camp-fire. Stretching his hands out to its warmth he looked at us with an increasing interest and—yes—with amusement. At last he chuckled.

"So old 'Bats' has been at it again, has he? Well, I never! He's a regular card, gentlemen, what with his odic force mania and the way he manages to escape from the asylum. Beg pardon, gentlemen. Excuse my smiling. I see he's got you cold. Come on home, Bats old boy." Turning to us he explained: "Bats, you know, short for 'Bats in the belfry'." He collared the unresisting John Steele with the greatest good humour.

